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THE ROLE OF THE TEACHER IN DEVELOPING LIFETIME READERS.

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ELEMENTARY TEACHERS ARE COMMENDED FOR DEVELOPING LIFETIME READERS. ELEMENTARY TEACHERS TELL STORIES AND READ ALOUD WITH ZEST AND NATURAL AFFECTION. THEY STRUCTURE THE CLASSROOM ENVIRONMENT TO MAKE IT ACCESSIBLE AND CONDUCIVE TO FREE AND ENJOYABLE READING, AND THEY GIVE ATTENTION TO THE BASIC SKILLS OF LANGUAGE AS WELL AS TO THE CONTENT THAT LANGUAGE BEARS. REALIZING THAT AN APPRECIATION OF LITERATURE DERIVES FROM A KNOWLEDGE OF THE QUALITIES WITHIN EACH LITERARY FORM, TEACHERS DWELL ON THESE QUALITIES AS THEY SHOW HOW A WRITER BUILDS A CERTAIN LITERARY FORM. WHILE OBSERVING HOW EACH CHILD RESPONDS TO A WRITER'S IDEAS, TEACHERS ACCEPT DIVERSITY IN THE CHILDREN'S RESPONSES, OPINIONS, AND JUDGMENTS. HENCE, IN THE STORIES THEY TELL OR READ ALOUD, IN THE SOUNDS, RHYTHMS, AND IMAGES REFLECTED BY THEIR VOICES, AND IN THE DISCUSSIONS THEY HOLD ON LITERARY FORMS, ELEMENTARY TEACHERS DEVELOP LIFETIME READERS. THIS PAPER WAS PRESENTED AT THE INTERNATIONAL READING ASSOCIATION CONFERENCE (SEATTLE, MAY 4-6, 1967). (NS)

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THE ROLE OF THE TEACHER IN DEVELOPING LIFETIME READERS

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May 5, 1967

I hope that most of you are elementary teachers. I hope so because I want to praise elementary teachers. And I would like some of you to hear the praise first hand. [Though I ought to say to those who read the praise in the Yearbook, it is meant just as personally for you.]

You see I have become convinced that elementary teachers are under-appreciated. Leading the parade of "under-appreciators" are professors like me. We have retired to the comforts of the colleges and universities. We no longer have to do the hard work of elementary teaching - if we ever did - and so we feel free to tell you what you ought to do. But this time one professor is going to try to behave differently. At least once I want to refrain from pious exhortation. I want to celebrate the good things elementary teachers have been doing while pedagogues like me have been talking.

So let me begin: I begin with a solid affirmation. Elementary teachers now play their roles with admirable devotion in developing lifetime readers. Fifteen years ago the late Professor William S. Gray of the University of Chicago and I reviewed criticism of reading instruction. We worked long and hard at the review which was published in the Elementary School Journal and occupied the

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entire September 1952 issue. Five years ago, James B. Conant chaired a national conference called by the Carnegie Foundation to which twenty-eight persons interested in reading instruction were invited. As one of the group I had another hard look at the quality of reading instruction. Our views were published in the pamphlet Learning to Read issued by Educational Testing Service in 1962. Today Professor Ralph W. Tyler is directing a national assessment of learning in our schools. I do not know what it will show about reading. But my experience through all these appraisals has led me to believe that we need to underline the positive accomplishments of elementary teachers.

It has always been - it will always be - tempting to dwell on deficiencies. Of course they are there. I said I did not know what the current national assessment would reveal. But it would be naive not to expect uneven achievement in reading. There will certainly be parts of our land where lifetime readers are not being developed. What will we do when these predictable appraisals are revealed? Will we who live in the protected environs of higher education say, "Of course. We've been telling them for years what they ought to do.?" I suspect many of us who are professors will indulge ourselves in just that kind of self-serving sanctimony. Before that happens, let me try to expiate some of my own past sins and perhaps even inoculate you who are elementary teachers against any forthcoming virulence.

The best way for me to do my penance, and I hope for you to protect yourselves against any future attack, is to emphasize what you as elementary teachers now do in developing lifetime readers. It seems to me the roles which you play are many and the competence with which you act is considerable.

In the kindergarten you start, through the primary years and beyond you continue, to make real and personal and satisfying the aesthetic rewards of language. You tell stories and you read aloud stories. You show in your voice the sounds, the rhythms, the images, the appeals to emotion which is the language of literature.

You tell stories to make immediate the promise of reading. As children are laboring to perfect their skill in reading, you personify what the lasting pleasures are. You deliberately intrigue children with words: quiet words and noisy words, words which call the imagination and words which calm the spirit. You pattern the words in all the wonderful ways in which an English sentence can mold idea and feeling. You gradually extend the number and qualities of incidents in a plot. You add dimension to characters. You build substance in setting. You lead the children to see the ideas behind stories. You realize that a story well told is as rewarding to teller as song to singer as picture to painter.

You read aloud with equal zest. You read as if life held no greater pleasure. You make certain that children see at least one person who loves to read and rejoices in the opportunity to share that satisfaction. You know there is no more powerful incentive to want to read than the obvious, real, uninhibited pleasure in reading personified by a well-loved person.

You make certain that the stories you read offer substance for childhood. You want to build growth on solid food which takes some chewing. Pablum we have enough of already. You know that solidly nutrient stories come from varied sources. The old tales - folk and fairy and fable - out of the oral tradition of many peoples - are part of your fare. You read the myths and legends and

hero stories which infuse literature around the world. You lend the impact of the lives of real personages, great and small. You read with natural affection the singing lines of poetry. Of course, whatever you choose, you guard against what William Jenkins has called an "attic mentality" which treasures only the old and dusty. You know literature is not substantive because it is aged. Literature is substantive because it is ageless.

You see to it that the classroom itself makes manifest the rewards of reading. You arrange so that the room can be littered with books. You make available a catholic array: serious writing and humorous writing, writing of fantasy and writing of realism, writing of lands and times far away, writing of the here and now. You have long known that accessibility is a key factor in encouraging lifetime reading.

You do not forget yourself in keeping alive the joys of reading. In your own life, books are as present as food and drink. You know you can only retain a sense of the long-term reading vistas for children by keeping alive the prospects in yourself. You know that it is not only children who need to be reminded that the work is worth the while.

Now what is the panorama in literature which you wish to keep fresh for children? You want children to see the potentialities in all the various forms which literature can take. You know that this kind of vision requires solid teaching. A child can't enjoy what he can't read. So you labor long to invest him with the early skills in word recognition and in sentence pattern. But you notice that increasingly these reading skills are being mastered early by the majority of children. So wisely you turn early from the skills of language to the content which language bears. You do not make the mistake of assuming that enjoyment of literature just grows. You teach for it.

Nor do you make the mistake of assuming that the material for skill building can also be used for developing lifetime interest in literature. The ends of skill building and literature teaching are different. The materials must also be different. In developing lifetime interest in literature you know you must have stories, poems, biographies, essays read as they were written. When any of these forms are adapted to serve as exercise material for skill building they no longer serve as literature. You do not argue that skill building is not necessary. That would be nonsense. You simply affirm that when you are building lifetime interests in literature you are in another role - equally important and equally deserving of appropriate material.

When you are playing this important role, what do you do? First you make clear what the resources of each literary form are. Appreciation of literature derives from specific qualities within each form. You know there is nothing nebulous about it. The qualities of each literary form have been known for centuries. So you show what the qualities are - whether it is a story, a poem, a play, a biography, or an essay.

You find that appreciating these qualities is not difficult once they are known to the children. You know that you can begin effectively in the first grade. You encourage individual creative responses. So long as the reader is true to the spirit of the writing, you help him see in his imagination, hear, taste, touch - whatever the appeal - in a way that is uniquely his own. You know that each child makes his own responses out of his own being, his own living, indeed his own reading.

You encourage children to take a different attitude towards words as they read literature. In skill building you want a child to know what a word means. In literature you are more interested in how a word means. Perhaps it is a word which buzzes or hums or even sings. Perhaps it is a word with a rhythmic beat which drums its way into the imagination. Perhaps it is an image-making word which makes a child see or hear or smell or taste or touch.

You help children see the way in which a story is built or a poem or a play or a biography or an essay. You are not afraid to use the literary terms. In a story you talk naturally about plot, character, setting, theme. You know that words like climax, conflict, surprise - scare no one. Indeed, the specific literary terms add security because they make discussion clearer and better focused.

You keep a sense of priorities as you teach for lifetime interest in literature. In a story you realize that a child must first know what is happening before he can enjoy a plot. He must know who the characters are before he can identify with them. He must know where the story develops before he can transport his imagination there. He must think about what the idea behind the story is before he lends his approval or disapproval.

You have learned through painful experience that it is tempting to try to leap into the appreciations you wish before the prior understandings are won. So you check before you move to teaching awareness of the artistry of the writer. When you are there, what awareness do you seek? In a story you look at plot. How did one event lead to another? You look at characters.

How did the author make them appear alive and believable? You look at setting. How did the place make a solid footing for the story? You look at theme. How was the idea behind the story gradually revealed?

Of course you move into this kind of teaching sensibly. You do not cross-examine. You do not try to make a career of one story. You are selective in what you try to teach. You do not try to develop awareness of everything the craft of the writer might have fashioned. In short, you are economical, watching carefully to see when you are developing the lifetime appreciation of the children and when you are exploiting your own interests.

You are particularly sensitive to invite the children's own creative additions to what the writer has only suggested. You know that in all art forms - literature, music, painting - each individual diverges in his responses. It is not the same as in scientific or mathematical communication where the responses are expected to converge. If you show a child a map of Puget Sound, the communication is quite explicit. If you show a child a painting of that same body of water, the communication intended is only suggested.

So as you show children how a writer built a story, you are equally interested in how each child responds to the writer's suggestions. You do not expect each child to have the same responses. And so long as a child is not violating the spirit of the writing, you welcome his individual creative additions. For he <u>is</u> adding himself - seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, touching - in a way unique to him. No one has lived precisely his life. He joins the writer and together they make new artistry.

When children have realized the most from a story - realized what the author said and how he said it - realized in their own persons how it all appeared - then you are ready to encourage them to make judgments. Why did the story succeed as well as it did? Why was the plot constructed as it was? Why did the characters behave as they did? Why was the setting placed where it was? Why did the theme develop as it did?

You have learned that the young do not always agree with their elders. You have learned to be humble. The books which are precious to you are not always dear at this very moment to those you teach. You know that you do not foster lifetime interests in literature by insisting that now and now only is the time for a given piece of writing. You realize that you can not hand anyone a satisfaction he does not feel.

So though you may wince a bit, you accept diversity in judgment. You find that your willingness to teach for a common understanding of what the qualities of literature are helps make the bases of divergence clearer. You are not talking ambiguously about appreciation. Your children know the simple vocabulary of literary discussion. So they can point with lucidity to the reasons why they chose to respond as they did. You do not attempt to coerce agreement but you do welcome references to those qualities on which divergence is based.

Now what about the other literary forms? Let's take biographies first. You have found that persuasions of biography have much in common with the appeals of the story. Literary biography is written out of an artistic integrity which the biographer imagines for his subject. The incidents, the thoughts, the feelings described are chosen to be reported in accord with this aesthetic

concept. You know that such biography is not an objective report. It is an emotional commitment to an image. There are, of course, currents and counter-currents in a good biography. A unifying concept out of which a portrait is made does not rule out conflict and suspense just as unity does not eliminate these qualities in a story. Indeed a good biographer, constrained as he is by outcomes already fixed, still strives to lend a sense of both the day to day and the long term uncertainties in the life of his subject.

Your students turn to biography to make both present and past seem living chronicles. You find they can apply essentially the same guides in assessment as they did in fiction. Of course they want to know <u>what</u> the man did. They are intrigued by <u>how</u> the life is conceived. They lend their own creative additions to the biographer's suggestions. They make their own judgments about <u>why</u> *the man was sketched as he was.*

Since there are now often a number of biographies written about the same man, you encourage boys and girls to judge differences in the several approaches. Thanks to your efforts, biography is fast becoming one of the more effective agents in recruiting lifetime readers.

The essay for children too is a rising literary form. Many of the books about the natural world are not purely reports of objective information. Many are personal responses to the wonder and beauty of nature. You find that children follow a writer like A. G. Milotte writing about a hippopotamus as avidly as they would a story. Or when Henry B. Kane writes about a meadow, you see that children are fascinated with the teeming action concealed within that green world. These essays draw all the color and excitement of good fiction.

And what about drama? You do not expect - and you do not find - much independent reading of drama. A play is meant to be played. So it is almost perforce a group activity. But many of you have found that creative dramatics lends support in developing reading interests. In this extemporaneous playing out of a story or a biography or a narrative essay or poem, you find many advantages. You find it permits full exploration of language under the stimulus of what has been read. You see it develops incentive to improvise as the reader commits himself through his speech to an image of what he has read. You recognize it reveals sensitivity to situations in choosing diction and tonal vestments in language. You watch it permit emotional release, lending a sense of the power of the language which might have only been partially felt in silent reading. In brief, you sense that this kind of drama develops the creative additions essential to genuine involvement in literature. The mere fact that minimal settings and costumes are employed in creative dramatics requires inventing language to convey the reader's own responses to the writer. You who are elementary teachers in the Northwest have served all of us well by your special demonstrations of what creative dramatics can do to foster lifetime reading.

I have saved until last that literary form which has caused you the greatest difficulty. That is, of course, poetry. Here I hope you forgive the professor saying that your successes have been modest. But then the successes have been even more modest at later levels of education. What success you have achieved in the elementary schools - and I do not mean to indicate the success has been inconsequential - modest, yes - inconsequential, no - has been due, first, to

your early beginnings. You have shown that a child, who early hears and tastes on his own tongue the excitement of poetry, may indeed resist all the culture pressures and retain his affection for poetry. The solid charm of nursery rhymes still prevades many kindergartens and primary grades. Beyond these years, your efforts with poetry have been more oppressed.

Now why is your success with poetry as much as it is? First of all, poetry is beleaguered by a very hostile cultural stereotype. In our adult culture, poetry is little prized. It is especially little valued by men. Of course this hostility is not without its effects on children - and I'm afraid the effects are particularly negative on boys.

Now what have you done to counteract this hostility? You have watched the choice of poems. You have had to sacrifice some "footsteps quiet and slow at a tranquil pace under veils of white lace". You have had to indulge in some quickened beats of jungle drums. It is true that the girls sometimes have tired of this unabashed catering to male tastes. But on balance, I think most of you have discovered that the girls, God bless them, have gone along.

But even given virile content, you have learned that the peculiar demands of the literary form in poetry makes acceptance difficult. Poems are arranged on a page in a different way. The spatial arrangement is dictated by rhythm and, when it is present, by rhyme. The placement is also employed, especially in modern poetry, to fasten the attention on the separate pieces of statement.

For example, look at these lines from William Carlos Williams:

It is difficult

to get news from poems

yet men die miserably every day

for lack

of what is found there.

You know that children have to learn what purposes these spatial arrangements serve.

You realize, too, that the fundamental syntactical device in English of word order is often disarranged by spatial arrangement in poetry. Unusual ordering of words greatly increases difficulty in reading.

You see that poetry is very terse. The child cannot gradually slip into understanding. He must be prepared to use the same text for much re-reading. Rarely does poetry yield its full impact on first reading.

You recognize that poetic diction is strange. It is the poet's effort to force the child to respond creatively. The poet wants to surprise his reader into new insights by his choice of words.

You observe that poets, of all literary artists, speak mostly by suggestion. This figurative language is also intended to evoke novel views of experience.

Now how have you coped with these difficulties of the poetic form? You have endowed poetry with your own genuine affection. You have read it and recited it naturally and easily. You have not employed any artificial lubricants. You know those who ooze from syllable to syllable kill interest in poetry forever. You have seized upon strategic moments. You know you can't move into poetry with the children fresh and fractured from recess. You use a

modulating time with quiet talk, sometimes, when the logistics aren't too difficult, even with a little music. Whatever you do, you try to keep it all as normal and as unaffected and as attractive as you are on your best days.

Occasionally, you may even drag in an itinerant male, a father who likes poetry and reads it with virility, a male principal who cares, a pilot, a sports figure, a scientist, a businessman. It seems crass. But you do sense the necessity surrounding poetry with some male aura, lent by men who are male and occupying positions boys value. You feel it is a pity to have to resort to such obvious stratagens. But you know that it is a small price to pay for the lasting rewards which those who are caught young will gain from poetry.

So I have ended my celebration of you who are elementary teachers - you who have done so much to develop lifetime readers - you who exemplify every day the kind of devotion to books about which another academic talked over three centuries ago!

> Books are life's best business. Vocation to them hath more emolument coming in, than all the other busy times of life. They are fee-less Counselors, no delaying Patrons, of easy access and kind Expedition, never sending away any Client or Petitioner - - - Count thy books in the Inventory Jewels, wherein a variety is the most excusable Prodigality and right use - - - the best husbandry. They are for company, the best Friends, in doubts, Counselors; in Dumps, Comforters. Time's Prospective, the Home Traveller's Ship, or Horse - - - the Mind's best Ordinary, Nature's Garden, and Seed-plot of Immortality.
>
> Richard Whitlock
>
> "Zootomia"
>
> 1654

Speech given at the International Reading Association Convention, Seattle, Washington, May 5, 1967.